

Worsening malnutrition amongst Spanish children

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A continuing fall in household income in Spain is causing many families to cut down on basic necessities such as food, according to a recent statement by Gabriel González-Bueno, responsible for Child Policies at UNICEF in Spain. He explained, “First they lower the quality of the food and buy cheaper. They stop buying meat and fish, later vegetables and fresh fruit. Instead they eat a lot of pasta and rice which do not contain all the necessary nutrients. Lastly, they reduce the amount of food they eat.”

He warned that this food deficit affects a child’s development as well as increasing the risk of respiratory and cardiovascular diseases and infections.

Following the imposition of successive austerity measures by Social Democrat (PSOE) and Popular Party (PP) governments, the social conditions of post-civil war Spain are returning.

Children are facing rapidly increasing levels of poverty and malnutrition. According to the UNICEF report “Child Well-being in Rich Countries: A comparative overview”, Spain has slipped down the rankings—from fifth out of 21 in the early 2000s to nineteenth out of 29 countries in 2009-2010. Over a quarter of under-16-years-olds—some 2.3 million—are now at risk of malnutrition. (Defined as not eating the 2,100 calories a day recommended by the World Health Organisation.)

Spain’s ranking will have worsened over the last three years as unemployment has since soared to 27 percent of the working population (over 50 percent of young people). There are now over 760,000 households with children where no adult works, 46,000 more than last year. Some 14.4 percent of children live in households with a high poverty rate, up from 13.7 percent last year.

Another recent report by the Catalan Ombudsman

(Síndic de Greuges) revealed that the risk of poverty amongst under 16-year-olds in Catalonia—one of the richest regions in Spain—stands at 28 percent, approximately 345,000 children. Almost 50,000 Catalan children are in families who cannot afford to buy meat or fish at least once every two days. There are 750 children under sixteen with severe nutritional problems related to extreme poverty and low incomes.

Conxi Martínez, vice-president of the Federation of Organisations for the Care and Education of Children and Adolescents (FEDAIA) which brings together 78 organizations providing meals to more than 35,000 children and youth, said child malnutrition is the direct result of families being hit by unemployment and severe economic problems. Children have no proper clothing, do not eat properly, do not have space to do homework or play at home and do not attend after-school activities and entertainment due to their parents’ lack of resources.

The three-month summer school break makes the situation worse because poorer families do not have access to subsidised school meals, which have already been cut by half as a result of regional government spending cuts, according to the parent organizations CEAPA.

Recent cases have shown the terrible side-effects of increasing child malnutrition. In Alicante, three children were hospitalised at the end of July due to an outbreak of tuberculosis, a disease previously considered eradicated in Spain. The Department of Health confirmed that one of the reasons the children fell ill was related to poor nutrition.

In Santa Cruz de Tenerife, in the Canary Islands, an elementary school opened during the summer vacations to offer English courses, but the main aim was to provide children from poorer families with at least one

hot meal a day. The region currently has one of the highest unemployment levels in Spain at 40 percent, and child poverty levels are around 30 percent of the population. The Island's education department said that 16 percent of students were not eating in their school canteens because their parents could not afford to pay for meals.

In Andalusia, with a jobless rate of 36 percent, the regional government was forced to offer a program in conjunction with local councils and charities in 57 schools throughout the region. Over the course of the summer it provides three meals a day for up to 4,000 children.

In Barcelona, a primary school head told *El País*, "Sometimes, a child comes to you with stomach-ache in the morning and if you ask, maybe you discover that the last thing they ate was a snack at seven in the evening the day before."

She notices many children not eating breakfast, picking at leftover food in the dining room or asking their classmates for food and others who are too weak or tired to pay attention in lessons.

Another school head in a working class neighbourhood in Barcelona, Les Roquetes, explained, "In the last two years I have seen severe cases, with some children fainting" and "I have had to call an ambulance twice due to malnutrition". He remembers the "horrific" case when he found a schoolboy rummaging through garbage in search for food.

Political representatives have reacted to the latest reports with cynicism. PP Congress spokesman, Rafael Hernando, declared cases of malnutrition were "rare" and "a responsibility of the parents."

The Catalan regional president, Artur Mas, acknowledged that there are cases of malnutrition in Catalonia but denied "there is hunger". People should "not confuse the two things," he added.

Even more callous was the Twitter comment of Ernesto Sáenz de Buruaga, the pro-PP host of the *La Mañana* programme on the Catholic-run COPE radio station following the setting up of the summer vacation free meals service in Andalusia. He tweeted, "Another occurrence in Andalusia. The children have three meals a day by decree. Why not a bicycle?"

The dramatic rise in poverty, hunger and inequality across Spain is caused by the economic crisis and the imposition of one draconian austerity package after

another, involving cuts in health care, education and social services, the raising of taxes and passing new labour laws attacking wages and conditions. While billions have been used to bail out the banks and super-rich, no serious measures are being contemplated to tackle the devastating effect on the most vulnerable in society—children.



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